



# SOLOMON ISLANDS

## EXPEDITION

December 1995

At the time of the Earhart disappearance, July 1937, Gardner Island (now Nikumaroro) was uninhabited. A year and a half later, in December 1938, a small colony of Gilbert Islanders was established on the atoll by the British Colonial Service as part of the Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme. The program was never an economic success and, in 1963, the colony was abandoned and the people were re-located to the Solomon Islands nearly 2,000 miles away.

## THE OTHER NIKUMARORO

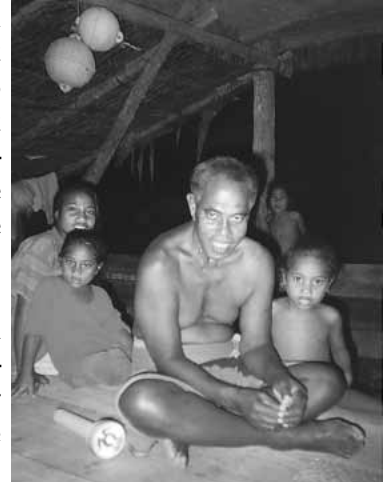
In December of 1995 TIGHAR sent Professor Dirk Ballendorf (TIGHAR #0838) of the Micronesian Research Center at the University of Guam on an expedition to the Solomons to seek out and interview the surviving former-residents of Nikumaroro.\* They live on Waghena (sometimes Vaghena, Vagena or Wagena), an island in Choiseul Province seldom visited by Westerners. About three or four hundred people, mostly under the age of 25, live in the village which is named Nikumaroro. They had never heard of TIGHAR or Amelia Earhart and only a few senior citizens remember the old island. Those who do are the children of the original Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme pioneers of 1938 and '39, all of whom are now dead.

## ISLAND STORIES

Dr. Teinamati Mereki was born in 1934 and his parents were among the first Gilbertese immigrants to Gardner Island. He attended el-

\* When we say "TIGHAR sent" we mean that Dirk donated his time and expertise, and a TIGHAR member donated the \$5,000 it took to pay for the trip.

ementary school on Gardner but left there in 1945 to attend school at Tarawa, the headquarters for the Gilbert & Ellice Islands Colony. He then attended medical school in Suva, Fiji before returning to Gardner sometime before 1960.



Dr. Teinamati Mereki

Dr. Mereki said that many people who remember Gardner know the story of the skeletons that were found there by the first settlers. Some say the skeletons were found lying side by side, others say they were not side by side. Some people think they came from the shipwreck (S.S. Norwich City went aground on Gardner's reef in 1929 with the loss of eleven lives). They were white people because they were wearing shoes. (Another interviewee, Rev. Aberaam Abera, says that they had not only shoes but remnants of clothing that islanders didn't wear.) One of the skeletons was judged to be that of a woman because it was smaller than the other. Dr. Mereki indicated on a map the general area where the skeletons were said to have been found. Nobody now alive knows what happened to the bones.

The following is an excerpt from the videotaped portion of the interview. Mereki = Dr. Teinamati Mereki; DB = Dirk Ballendorf.

Mereki: But, this aluminium, they make a comb (gestures toward photo of TIGHAR Artifact 2-2-V-5, a comb fashioned from aircraft aluminum) they said from plane crashed on Sydney.

DB: Sydney Island.

Mereki: During the war.

DB: So they never heard of any crash on Gardner.

Mereki: No. They tried to look for anything to... from which these bones could come... but didn't find a trace of it.

DB: Some Coast Guards say that local boys told them of a plane wreck away from the village.

Mereki: Maybe these two people who died knew the story but these one generation [nods to his friends], no. [smiling]  
Before ending the interview Prof. Ballendorf asked whether anybody has any souvenirs from

Kiron: No.

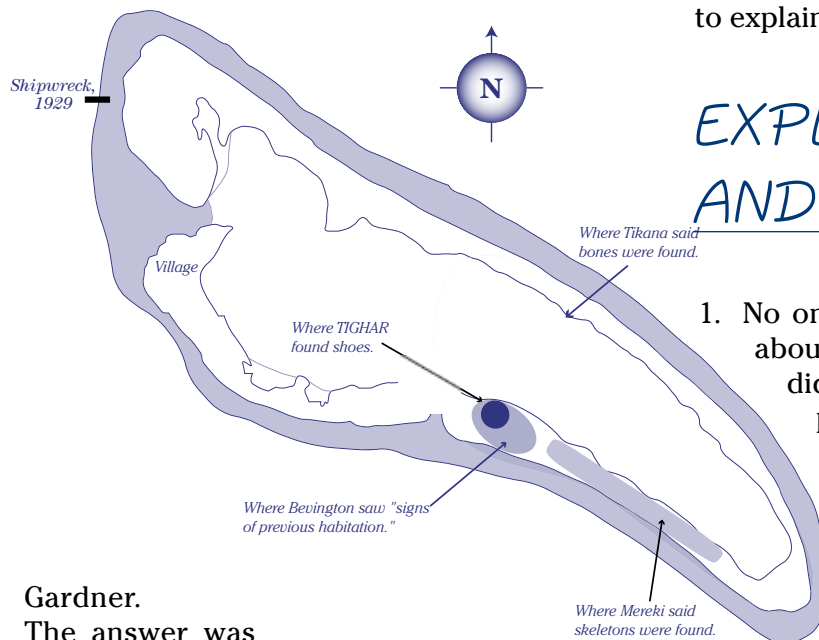
DB: How did the men on Gardner fish? Where did they get their fish hooks and lures? [This question was prompted by the recollection of a USN wartime pilot that he saw an airplane control cable used as a fishing line leader at Gardner.]

Kiron: [makes an amused face] The feathers for the lures came from roosters and the fish hooks came from the store.

DB: Did she ever hear of an airplane wreck on Gardner?

Kiron: No.

These exchanges provide interesting insights into the island folklore and the peoples' attempts to explain it.



## EXPLANATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Gardner.

The answer was "no."

He also interviewed Enerite Kiron, a woman "more than sixty years old" who does not speak English. Everything she said was summarized by a translator. Dirk was under the impression that this woman knew the bone story, but she didn't. She had two other stories, neither related to bones or airplanes. One of her stories, about a ghost, is familiar to us from other sources.

DB: Does she know any other stories about Gardner?

Kiron: No.

DB: Does she have any souvenirs from Gardner?

1. No one interviewed was aware of a story about an airplane on Gardner, but neither did everyone know the bone story. Some people know some stories. Other people know others. That is hardly surprising. It is certainly possible that there was an airplane story that simply didn't get passed along to anyone now living on Vaghena.

2. It is apparently part of the bone story that the people who found the skeletons tried to find some explanation for them (i.e. searched the immediate area) but were unsuccessful. There was some speculation that the skeletons might be those of victims of the Norwich City disaster.

3. Mereki is aware of the Sydney crash and attributes to that source objects on Gardner, such as the comb, made from airplane debris.

## CONCLUSIONS

The version of the bone story told to Prof. Ballendorf is the third time we've heard this tale from totally different sources. It's essentially the same story told to a San Diego newspaper reporter in 1960 by retired Coast Guardsman Floyd Kilts who said he heard it from a "native" on Gardner Island in 1946. In 1991 Bauro Tikana, now living in Tarawa, said that when he arrived on Gardner in 1940 he was told by laborers there that bones had been found both near the shipwreck and on the "other end" of the island. Clearly, this is a well-established bit of island folklore—but is it true and, if so, whose bones were found?

To establish that an anecdote is true requires supporting evidence which is not anecdotal. This could be a contemporaneous written or photographic record, or it could be the discovery of physical evidence. There are many, many stories about Amelia Earhart being seen on Saipan, etc. but no supporting evidence has ever come to light. In the case of the Nikumaroro bone story we at least have some non-anecdotal support. British Colonial Service officer Eric Bevington toured the island three months after Earhart disappeared. His diary (a contemporaneous written source) confirms that he saw "signs of previous habitation" but doesn't say where. When queried in 1992 he indicated (anecdote) the same general area where Mereki says the

bones were found. It was from that same part of the island that, in 1991, TIGHAR recovered the remains of shoes (physical evidence). Shoes are specifically mentioned in two of the three versions of the bone story. There is, we conclude, reason to think that the bone story is fundamentally true. Were they the bones of men lost in the wreck of the Norwich City? If so, it means that two bodies (one of which was later misidentified as a woman) washed ashore together and intact (including shoes) two shark-infested miles from the wreck. If the shoes found by TIGHAR are the shoes in the story they did not come from the 1929 shipwreck. The heel is American and dates from the mid-1930s and, along with the other parts found, matches the shoes worn by Earhart on her last flight. There is, we conclude, a significant probability that the Nikumaroro bone story describes the discovery of the bodies of Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan.

As for the origin of airplanes parts, the assumption that everything came from the wreck on Sydney is understandable but incorrect. Components from two different aircraft have been found on Nikumaroro. One of the aircraft was a Consolidated Model 32, specifically one of 1,653 B-24Cs or Ds. We strongly suspect that this was the Sydney crash. The other airplane appears to have been Lockheed 10E Special NR16020.

